

At the Regular Quarterly Meeting of the Committee of Protestant Dissenting Laymen and Ministers of the Three Denominations for the West-Riding of the County of York, held at the Stafford's-Arms, in Wakefield, on Thursday, September, 3, 1791.

WATSON SCATCHERD, Esq. in the Chair;

I. *Resolved unanimously,*

That an ADDRESS to the PEOPLE of ENGLAND, stating the grounds of our PROTESTANT DISSENT, and our general disposition with respect to the civil and ecclesiastical establishment of this country, be published by this committee, and circulated throughout the kingdom.

II. *Resolved unanimously,*

That the address now read be adopted by this meeting, and signed by the chairman in the name of the committee.

ADDRESS to the PEOPLE of ENGLAND.

WE, the Committee of the Protestant Dissenting Laymen and Ministers of the Three Denominations in the West-Riding of the County of York, now assembled at our stated Quarterly Meeting, cannot, in justice to ourselves and to the general cause of Religious Liberty, pass over in silence the atrocious acts which have lately been committed in the town and neighbourhood of Birmingham. On the illegality of the violence which hath been offered to the property of our brethren in that part of the kingdom by a deluded populace, the civil Judge has already decided in the regular exercise of his office; and we sincerely compassionate the unhappy wretches, who, as a salutary example to others, have been sentenced to expiate their crimes with their lives. But we deem it still necessary, on our part, to obviate the invidious misrepresentations of our principles and conduct which have produced this fanatical spirit, and which appear to us to have higher origin, as they are still industriously circulated, for the most part by anonymous writers, in some of the public prints.

The specious cry of Church and King hath been artfully assumed by our enemies; with an evident design to make the ignorant believe that we are enemies to both, and that neither can be safe while we are suffered to exist.

That we are not members of the Church of England we have always openly avowed, by the clearest and most decisive of all declarations, an uniform course of conduct. We cannot submit to her authority in matters of faith. We cannot appropriate to ourselves, in a solemn act of religious worship, a Form of Prayer which we should not be permitted to adopt to our own views, by the alteration or omission of a single sentence. We cannot discover in the discourses of Christ, or the writings of his Apostles, any foundation for that distinction of ranks in the Christian ministry which is prescribed in the episcopal form of church government. We cannot accede to rules of faith, or modes of worship, in which the civil magistrate claims a right of interference. In our religious sentiments, and in such of our actions as are purely religious, we call no man Master upon earth; we rest entirely on the sufficiency of the scriptures, and the right of private judgement. This is a right which the Reformers of the English Church themselves exercised when they separated from the Church of Rome; and it is the only right which we assume as the ground of our dissent. In the exercise of it we are led to a great diversity of sentiment: and we certainly disagree with each other in religious opinions more than some of us differ from the doctrinal parts of the established creed. But in this we acquiesce, as the unavoidable effect of personal enquiry in the present state of the human understanding. It is a liberty which we equally give and take: for we dare not judge another's servant, knowing that to his own master he must stand or fall; we should think it impious to intrude between the conscience of a brother, and that venerable Being who alone knoweth his heart.

With these sentiments it is not possible that we should have an unfriendly disposition to the members of the establishment. We cannot deny them that right to a personal choice which we exert in our own; and a shameless opposition to all our professions, have recourse to violence, or employ illiberal artifice in support of our cause. While they retain their present opinions, we must be earnestly solicitous that they may preserve the undisturbed enjoyment of their articles, their liturgy, and their episcopal government. We have, indeed, no private interest which can stimulate us to acts of unchristian hostility. We have no desire that our own opinions, or mode of worship should be supported by the civil magistrate, or by the aid of a legal impost. We are willing to trust their preservation and increase to the force of truth, and the conviction of mankind. And whatever may be our views concerning the absolute authority, or general expedience of a religious establishment, we rejoice in the benefits which are actually produced by the diligent instruction and exemplary conduct of its ministers. We esteem a clergyman who resides in his parish, and is at once the friend, the guide, and patron of his flock, to be one of the most respectable, because he ranks with the most useful of human characters. We are so far from wishing ill to any of the Clergy of the English Establishment, that we should feel a lively pleasure in the removal of every circumstance which appears to us, at present to impede their comfort and usefulness. We will not hesitate to declare, that, in our apprehension, their situation would be liable to much fewer objections, if they were left to the free study of the Sacred Writings, unfettered by subscription to human explanations; if pluralities were absolutely prohibited; if the poorer livings were increased, by a distribution of the ample revenues which are now attached to sinecure dignities; and if their stipends were not raised in a mode which has a manifest tendency to perpetuate jealousies between them and the occupiers of land. In suggesting these imperfections in the present administration of the church, without any view of entering ourselves into its communion, we do not conceive that we are acting the part of its enemies; for whatever encreases its usefulness, must surely add to its strength and stability: but if we should happen to be mistaken in the probable effect of all or any of these changes, our error cannot produce any just occasion for alarm. Not being included within its pale, we have no pretence for taking an active part in its concerns: all that we can with propriety do, is to offer our impartial opinion, and to express our benevolent wishes; if the church of England be ever found to want reformation, that reformation must originate in the wisdom, and be completed by the virtue of its own adherents.

Such are the reasons of our dissent, and such are our sentiments concerning the ecclesiastical establishment of this country. And we are confident, that there is nothing in them which can render us enemies to the State. We have as dear an interest in the public peace and prosperity, as the proudest and most elevated of our countrymen. The aggregate of the property which is possessed by individual Dissenters, is far from inconsiderable. It is, moreover, for the most part of that kind which would be the soonest affected by civil contentions: it is chiefly vested in commercial stock, or the machinery of manufactories; and much of it may be dissipated in an hour, by the fury of bigotted, or the rapacity of unprincipled insurgents. The State, therefore, has a valuable pledge for our good behaviour, and might rest secure from any apprehension that we are inclined to disturb its tranquillity, even if our past conduct had not furnished so strong a presumption of our pacific disposition. But the experience of a century has witnessed our quiet submission to the laws, and our active regard to the welfare of our country. We have been engaged in no rebellion. We have favoured no insurrections.

We are not averse to acknowledge that, in conjunction with many eminent characters who have no connection with us in our religious capacity, we sincerely congratulate the inhabitants of a neighbouring country, on their late deliverance from the power of a despotic government, and their present flattering prospect of being blessed with the possession of legal liberty. We have not the arrogance to believe that we are competent judges of all the measures which have been employed for the attainment of this invaluable good; we are well aware that many imperfections have always attended the best devised schemes of human policy. But whatever may be the errors, the defects, or the inexpedience of some of their plans, we think it sufficiently evident, that more than twenty millions of people, who have long been political slaves, are now become free men. In this auspicious change we anticipate a glorious addition to the general happiness of mankind. We exult in the reflection that we live in an age, which has produced a body of Legislators who, by directly disclaiming all offensive wars, have presented a new example to an admiring world.

But while we declare our satisfaction in the Revolution which has lately taken place in the government of France, we protest against the conclusion which has been no less uncharitably than illogically drawn, that we are therefore desirous of a revolution in our own country. If a revolution had been desirable at home, we durst not thus have expressed our joy: the horrid dungeons of an English Bastille would have terrified us into silence. But we have always boasted, that by the elevation of the Prince of Orange to the throne, and by the act which fixed the succession on the House of Hanover, our general liberties have been fully recognized and confirmed. We have no wish to get the act of Settlement repealed, or to alter the present form of government. We are attached to the British Constitution, as it consists of King, Lords and Commons. We give our hearty suffrage to the assignment of the executive department, and of a voice in the legislation, to the person of the King. We have a decided preference for an hereditary monarchy, subject only to such restrictions as directly flow from the precedent of Sixteen Hundred and Eighty Eight, which we devoutly pray that neither we nor our descendants may ever have occasion to bring into exercise. We respect a body of Nobles, which, in a political view, have little or no resemblance to that which lately existed in France. We regard with a zealous veneration, the weight which is given to the people at large in the management of national affairs, by the voice of the House of Commons.

We will not, indeed, pretend to conceal, that we are not perfectly satisfied with the present state of the popular representation. But this is by no means peculiar to us as Protestant Dissenters. In this we only follow, at a humble distance, some of the most illustrious names that have distinguished our country. Here we feel that we are Englishmen, independent of every religious description. Here, therefore, we cannot act as a separate body. Here we shall always be happy to co-operate with the wise and good, but we will never connect ourselves with the seditious and intemperate. It is our deliberate judgment, that the evils we lament, will admit of a ready redress, and may be constitutionally remedied without the violation of personal right, and with equal advantage to the Monarch and the People.

As an earnest of the peaceable measures which on this and all other occasions we are determined to pursue, we flatter ourselves that we may safely appeal to our general conduct in our late application to Parliament, for the repeal of the Corporation and Test Acts. A few indiscreet expressions in the Resolutions of a single society in a neighbouring county, have, indeed, been pointed out, and condemned with a willing asperity; but the public may be assured that they were entirely disapproved by the general body of Dissenters; Conscious that we have no political demerits which can render us unworthy of being admitted to the full privileges of citizens, we spoke in the manly tone of conviction, but in none of our larger associations did we ever depart from a becoming deference to the legislative power. We depended on the justice of our country. And we have not given vent to our impatience in deeds of turbulence and rapine. We have been guilty of no violence: we have threatened no mischief to the persons or property of our most violent opposers. And we trust, we shall never deviate from our accustomed good order. We shall from time to time, as may seem to ourselves expedient, renew our application to Parliament, and respectfully repeat the grounds of our complaint; but we will not suffer the most mortifying neglect, or contumelious treatment to provoke us to a breach of the peace. We will wait, with steady temper, for a change in the public mind; and in the general course of our lives will apply, with patriotic diligence, to the duties of our respective professions. It shall be our constant ambition to fill our several stations with credit to ourselves, and with usefulness to the community; and if we cannot obtain the cordial esteem of every class of our fellow subjects, we will do all that the Author of Nature hath put in our power, we will endeavour to deserve it.

Signed by Order, in the Name of the Committee,
WATSON SCATCHERD, Chairman.

III. *Resolved unanimously,*
That the Rev. Mr. Moorhouse, the Rev. Mr. Wood, and the Rev. Mr. Langdon, be appointed as a Sub-committee to prepare a letter to the Rev. Dr. Priestley, expressing our concern for his sufferings in the late riots at Birmingham.

IV. *Resolved unanimously,*
That the letter drawn up and now delivered in by the Sub-committee, be signed by the Chairman, and sent to the Rev. Dr. PRIESTLEY, in the name of the Committee.

To the Rev. Dr. PRIESTLEY.

REV. SIR,
WE the Committee of Protestant Dissenting Laymen and Ministers of the Three Denominations for the West Riding of the County of York, cannot avoid expressing the interest we feel in your late sufferings from a deluded populace. However some of us may differ from you in several doctrinal opinions, we are well convinced of the integrity of your character, and think ourselves highly obliged to you for your services in the cause of religious and civil liberty. In this cause we respect you as a confessor; and admire the magnanimity and meekness, equally honourable to the man and the christian, with which you have borne the losses you have sustained. The approbation of your own mind, the esteem of the friends of freedom, and the persuasion that your personal misfortunes, under the direction of a wise and benevolent Providence, will finally prove conducive to public good, will, we doubt not, still continue to afford you support, and enable you to rejoice even in tribulation. Sincerely wishing you every blessing which Heaven can bestow, we remain,
Rev. Sir,

Yours, very respectfully,
Signed by Order, in the Name of the Committee,
WATSON SCATCHERD, Chairman.

V. *Resolved unanimously,*
That five hundred copies of the Address be separately printed for circulation, and that it be also printed in the Morning Chronicle, the Gazetteer, the Star, and the General Evening Post; in the Leeds Intelligencer and Mercury; in the York Courant and Herald; in the Sheffield General Advertiser; and in the Chelmsford Chronicle.

VI. *Resolved unanimously,*
That the thanks of this Meeting be given to the Chairman.
Signed by Order,
WATSON SCATCHERD, Chairman.